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GUEST ESSAY

There's Nothing Wrong With Wanting Men

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Gender relations are tense to the point of hostility these days. Straight men and women are politically and culturally divided. We're in a world of Andrew Tate and OnlyFans, trad wives and incels. Just over half of single men and women alike report feeling pessimistic about finding a partner they'll be happy with. Our prospective other halves, women say of men, are at best clueless and emotionally immature and at worst actively toxic. Among men, women are often viewed as romantically spoiled, drowning in options we're too self-absorbed to select from if we're even worth their time at all. It's no wonder we aren't having much sex.

And if this narrative of despair hasn't been sold to you already, there is a constant deluge of essays, Instagram Reels and podcasts telling us that men and women are irrevocably split. It isn't the long-running narrative that women are from Venus and men are from Mars, or the "can't live with 'em, can't live without 'em" mentality: It is that our desires for our lives are no longer compatible. Such is the gospel of heteropessimism, a neologism coined by the academic Asa Seresin in 2019. But don't believe it.

I'm going to go out on a limb and say it: There has still never been a better time in human history to happily and successfully pursue heterosexuality, if that is your thing, as it is

mine. As straight Americans, we are in the midst of a period of all-but-unprecedented sexual, social and romantic liberty. We have greater freedom than ever before to become whom we want and to date whom we want. And with that should come an optimism strong enough to render the gender wars irrelevant.

Heteropessimism is, at bottom, little more than a bad mood about the state of being straight. It is the pervasive sense that heterosexuality is fundamentally flawed and unfulfilling — even structurally unsalvageable. Sometimes, heteropessimists argue that it's not strictly *heterosexuality* that is unfulfilling but the opposite gender itself. As Mr. Seresin noted, heteropessimism tends to involve "a heavy focus on men as the root of the problem." Heteropessimism is the depressing feeling that the relationships humans have been having for thousands of years are now in a state of total disrepair, and that we are only setting ourselves up for disappointment in attempting to buy in at all. The opposite sex is a trap best avoided.

Introducing heteropessimism, Mr. Seresin wrote that it was more often performative than factual — a kind of social-media-fueled blowing off of steam more than an actual decoupling from coupling. Ultimately, it is a rationalization — a way of chalking up our romantic failures and fears as something embedded in the political structures. And of course, in many ways, they might be. Women are getting more and more liberal; men, increasingly conservative. That mismatch is indeed something broader than an awkward first date, a gap widening among the younger generation.

The performativity isn't all gone, but in the past year or so, heteropessimism has become a different beast. Essay after essay has chronicled the "trouble with wanting men," as Jean Garnett wrote last summer, and men's "retreat" from intimacy, as Rachel Drucker wrote around the same time. Ms. Drucker wants men to "come back" — but how can we urge them to do so when women are so keen to frame a desire for men as "trouble" to begin with? Last October, Chanté Joseph wrote in Vogue about how having a boyfriend is socially "embarrassing." It's "fundamentally uncool to be a boyfriend-girl," she wrote. Why would men want to be with women who don't want them?

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It's become a self-fulfilling ideology. Now, nearly 70 percent of college-educated singles feel negatively about the possibility of finding a partner who's right for them.

I propose something new: hetero-optimism, in which one does not shy away from the ills (real and imagined) of heterosexuality but considers our own potential for navigating them, still believing that some hope for our romantic future exists.

Much of the disappointment in heterosexuality stems from a place of mismatched expectations. According to the Survey Center of American Life, just over half of single women believe they and their peers are happier than married women. They're wrong, at least on average: Married women are more likely to report being "very happy" with their lives than single women, and the same goes for men, the General Social Survey has found.

Many women blame male egos for relationship strife. Some men, certainly, still wish to be breadwinners and patriarchs, even as society changes. But do most men really want that? More married couples than ever report earning about the same in income, and although full equality remains elusive, Bureau of Labor Statistics data indicates that men are doing more household labor than ever before. Despite what you'll hear on social media, relationships are becoming more equal — not less.

Michael J. Rosenfeld, a professor of sociology at Stanford University who studies dating and the internet, told me that while we have more freedom than we used to in dating, it does often still *feel* harder. The actual process of spending time finding a partner, of going on seemingly endless dates, is itself a freedom: Women are no longer expected to find the support of a man the moment we move out of our parents' home. Dr. Rosenfeld connected higher average ages at first marriage with greater contentment in marriage. People, particularly in smaller communities, once had few options and functionally had to marry one of them, he said. "If it didn't end up working out great, that was tough darts," he told me. "Who said you were supposed to be happy?"

Heteropessimism isn't just for women. Men like the white nationalist Nick Fuentes and the Tate brothers — influencers who are accused of human trafficking and rape — also promote a form of heteropessimism. Their basic argument is that women are not worth the time or are something to dominate and discard, that there is something wrong with them and men are better off alone. These manosphere figures are far less thoughtful and far more hateful in their wording than feminist heteropessimists, but their argument is functionally equivalent. Both groups argue that the other half is just bad. Give up, they tell us. Both are willing to let the cycle of loneliness and atomization continue.

But even most young men — the demographic Mr. Fuentes and the Tates seek to appeal to — aren't interested in what they're selling. Young men continue to hold more positive views of gender equality than do men of other generations: A 2025 YouGov survey of men

in Britain found that younger men were more likely to hold progressive gender attitudes than their older peers, and 71 percent of young men had a negative opinion of Mr. Tate. Just 6 percent of young men "have a negative opinion of women" — half as many as reported a negative opinion of men. Globally, per a recent Ipsos survey, more men than ever identify as feminists, with Gen Z taking the highest share.

Of course, heterosexuality is not without genuine problems. We've seen attacks on reproductive liberty gain ground in recent years; while most American women now have access to more effective, accessible and safe options to protect ourselves from sexually transmitted infections and unplanned pregnancy than any generation before, those freedoms are threatened. #MeToo unearthed a darkness that pervaded our culture and never quite left. Women do still perform more child care and household labor than men, while also earning less in the workplace. Women remain the majority of victims of domestic violence and sexual assault. It is perhaps for these reasons that women seem to feel far worse about men than men do about women.

But these issues are not in themselves reason to abstain from heterosexuality entirely. The argument for hetero-optimism is not to ignore problems but to highlight that, despite what heteropessimism might have you believe, these problems are lessening over time. Heteropessimism is about abandoning progress; an optimist would instead seek to solve problems and continue to grow.

One problem with heteropessimism is its tendency to closely link personal choices with politics. Rebecca L. Davis, a historian and the author of a history of sex in America, said the second-wave feminist slogan "the personal is political" had seeped too deeply into the public consciousness. The slogan, she told me, insists that many things once seen as personal failures should be viewed as results of structural problems. The feminism of the 1970s emphasized that the problem was not with "the male sex," but rather that society as a whole was flawed. Heteropessimists take "the personal is political" as a literal, narrow axiom, returning responsibility to the individual, rather than focusing on social pressures.

For feminists like Andrea Dworkin, that meant viewing dating men as a failure of personal politics. It's the same type of thinking that leads contemporary young women to ask, "Why does having a boyfriend feel Republican?" Dr. Davis doesn't think that framework is quite right. "Big, structural problems" might perpetuate inequalities, she explained, but seeing heterosexuality "as a problem," and one that "dooms you to a certain kind of disappointment," fails to address the root of the problem. It may, in fact, create new problems in itself.

It's tempting to give up on the quest for love. But here again we are mistaking our

freedom of choice for a lack.

Three years ago, I argued that we all need to "have more sex." That was, in part, literal. But mostly, it was about perspective. Our society is atomizing, becoming less connected. There's a sex recession on, after all. What we needed then, and need now, is a renewed cultural emphasis on human connection — including sex and love. These are social goods. The beauty of contemporary heterosexuality is that women have the option to engage with it or not. We are forgetting that pessimism is an attitude. It may have a material origin, but it is not itself reality. This, too, is another one of the liberties we are able to enjoy: We can choose to eschew pessimism in favor of optimism.

Women are no longer economically or legally bound to men; we have freedom to pursue love and sex as we please, and with whom we please (not just with men), in ways that our mothers and grandmothers could only dream of. We have made the usual consequences of consensual, recreational sex essentially optional. All this might scare some men — here again we have the freedom to look elsewhere. But let's not squander that freedom, giving it all up in favor of spending more time getting angry on the internet. We are more educated and informed than ever, and with that comes an unparalleled level of choice, if we're courageous enough to take advantage of it.

Sure, men who spout hateful ideas exist. I see them in my work as a writer every day. We have the privilege to ignore them in favor of men who don't, though — I'm marrying one such man this summer. I met him in college, 10 years ago. He is supportive of my ambitions, both in career and in family. I'm supportive of his, too. He does the dishes. I sweep the floors. I often tell him I feel like the luckiest girl in the world, and because I have him, it's true.

I am a hetero-optimist because I'm in love. But I also know that our relationship is the product of intention — of a confident commitment to each other — as much as it is a matter of luck. These feelings are available to anyone. I want other people to have what we do. We have all the choice in the world, including the choice to never marry, date or have sex again. We have the choice to date younger, date older, date around or date one person forever. These should be *our* personal choices, informed by our own experiences, not the product of political pressure or online rhetoric.

Forget the gender wars: Let's go forth with the excitement and fun we deserve. Now is the time to be hetero-optimists.

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